A taste for the unacceptable

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In 479 B.C. the Greeks under the Spartan general Pausanias capture the tent of the defeated Persian king Xerxes and his general Mardonius. Herodotus (9.82) records the moment:

'when Pausanias saw the tent of Mardonius with its decoration of gold and silver and elaborate fabrics, he ordered the bakers and "makers of opsa" *to prepare a dinner just as they had for Mardonius. They did as they were told, and Pausanias then saw the couches of gold and silver with beautiful coverings, tables of gold and silver and other magnificent artefacts for the feast. Marvelling at the good things set before him, as a joke he ordered his own servants to prepare a Spartan dinner. When the meal was ready, the difference was very great, Pausanias, still amused, sent for the Greek generals and when they were gathered he showed them both forms of dinner and said: "men of Greece, this is the reason I brought you here. I wanted to show you the folly of the Persians. They have a lifestyle like this, and yet they come to us in our poverty to steal from us." '*

Persian plenty

The Greek and the Persian dinner is a classic illustration of the distinction Greeks saw between themselves and barbarians in this period, in this case the extreme contrast between Persians and Spartans. Herodotus is impressed by the selling of the meal: the furniture and tableware made in precious metals. The Persians here are eating in a manner not unfamiliar to the Greeks, who, Spartans probably included, had reclined on couches at dinner with a side table, if they were wealthy enough, for over a century – but they are eating in a different *style,* and are doing so on campaign. Did the Spartans take couches and dining equipment with their army? This is very unlikely.

The Persians took specialist cooks on campaign, the Greeks ordinary servants. Were the Persian bakers just like their counterparts in Greece? Was the bread different? Were the *opsa* different *[opsa* were relishes and sauces based on meat, fish, fruit, and vegetables]? We are not told, but from what Herodotus says elsewhere (1.133), it is likely that the balance of the meal was reversed. The Persians ate little cereal, a great deal of meat, including horse and camel (which Greeks did not eat), and many varieties of dessert. The Spartans on the other hand ate a large amount of barley bread or porridge and a piece of pork cooked in the characteristic Spartan 'black soup'. To put it crudely, half a horse followed by fine pastries contrasts with a huge bowl of barley porridge and a small piece of pork.

Two things are illustrated here: (1) the way in which foods and eating practices distinguish one country or group from another; (2) the mixture of fascination, envy, and contempt the Greeks felt for the Persians. For Greek and Roman society, the luxury of food from the East was a matter about which the y were always ambivalent.

Greek poverty

The alleged poverty of Greek generals and aristocrats is of course relative. The majority of citizens (and slaves) did not come into the reckoning. In general, Greeks and Romans lived on the standard Mediterranean staples of wheat/barley, wine, olive oil, and strong-tasting herbs and relishes. They used olive oil rather than butter; they drank wine rather than beer; and in the case of the Greeks, they probably only ate meat when they were sacrificing to the gods or shortly afterwards, unless they caught birds or wild animals. The Italians ate more meat. Most Greeks, that is peasant farmers who did not grow for great surplus, nor often experienced famine, ate cereal (*siton,* bread from wheat flour, for preference, but in most cases uncooked barley porridge), an *opson* of fruit or vegetable, and wine. Meat was not very common. The best description of peasant fare is in the *Moretum,* a poem attributed to Virgil. Simylus, an Italian peasant, grinds his own corn and makes a simple bread in the hearth underneath earthenware tiles. His is a vegetarian diet, based on onions, leeks, nasturtium, endive, and colewort, of which only the latter is not cooked in Britain now. These plants he grinds up in a mortar with cheese, olive oil, and garlic to make a*moretum,* a thick paste to eat with his rough bread – the Roman equivalent of *siton* and *opson* – and all washed down with wine.

If we want to know what the majority of Greeks and Romans ate, this is it. Some had more variety, others, slaves in particular, less. It is the wealthy and aristocratic classes of course who dominate our literary sources.

New food from the East

What was it that may have been thought better about Persian breads and *opsa* and other foods – apart from vast quantities of meat? (1)There was a general westward movement of new foods into Greece: the domestic fowl [called the 'Persian bird' in Aristophanes], pheasant, peach [in Greek the 'Persian apple'], apricot ['the Armenian apple']. The Persians in their turn certainly at a later period – imported eastern products from India and China. (2) Phoenician flour was praised, and Cappadocian bread. If the Persians themselves ate little cereal, some of the peoples under their control specialised in bakery. (3) Greeks considered *karuke,* an *opson* from Lydia, to be very luxurious. It was made from cheese, meat stock, breadcrumbs, and had a strong flavour of aniseed. Other eastern foods probably tasted slightly exotic to the Greek palate as well, especially if cooked in different oils (for example – according to Herodotus – in Babylon there was no olive oil, only sesame) or incorporating

dairy products (true of later Persia). The Greeks *were* interested in their eastern neighbours and did import goods and customs from the Persians.

The ideal diet?

Interesting ideas about foods emerge from Plato's discussion on diet for his ideal state:

‘ "They will grow barley and wheat for foo d and make rough and fine flours. They will knead them and bake them into fine barley cakes and loaves set out all rushes or fresh leaves, they will recline on rough beds of oak leaves and myrtle and will feast with their children... " Glaucon intervened: "You seem to be making them feast without any opsa*." "You're right", I said. "I forgot they must have* opsa*, salt and olives and cheese; and they will stew iris bulbs and vegetables, country people's stews. And for dessert we'll set before them figs and chickpeas and beans; and myrtle-berries and acorns they will roast in the ashes, while they drink in moderation. They will lead this life in peace and good health .. . " Glaucon said: "If you were providing a city for pigs how would the food be any different ? . . . I think they should recline on couches and dine from tables and have such* opsa *and desserts as people have now." " I see. We're seeing how to set up not just a city, but a luxurious city." ‘*

[A long list of 'luxuries' follows, including fish and meat.] Plato locates his original healthy meal (i) in the countryside, (ii) in a vegetarian context, (iii) eaten on the ground.

'Luxury' often comes in descriptions of foods, as something desired by some and contemned by others. Why should people desire it? Because it raises life above the basic and utilitarian level. Above subsistence farming to a surplus, above filling the belly to enjoying food. Luxury for Plato was located particularly in Sicily. Sicily was famous for cheese and pigs. On this base of good produce, sophisticated cooking developed. Cookery books were written in the fourth century and chefs became more prominent and ambitious. Sicilian authors were the first to include recipes in the form of instructions to cook, by this method and not that. Food preparation became a skill and an art. As in the modern world, top chefs tended to be men, though not exclusively. All this is a way in which the Greek mainland was influenced from the *West,* albeit by other Greeks, as well as from the East.

Foreign temptation

It is then not just a matter of barbarian luxury contrasting with Greek (and Rom an) poverty. Tempting foods came from all sides, fish from Byzantium, silphium, a pungent herb, from Cyrene on the coast of N. Africa, spices from Arab traders. There was a continuing tension between the attractiveness of luxuries from abroad and the rejection of them. One group might be in favour of the new product, another against. We might compare British views of the French, a mixture of fascination and disgust. So the French may be criticised for their

sauces, snails, horse meat and dogs in restaurants, while other things may be accepted (the words *café* and *restaurant* for example), just as the Greeks accepted Persian dining couches. These are continuing patterns of behaviour among fairly rich people. Peasants like Simylus and poor people everywhere eat what is most readily available.

It is all a matter of change and perception. The Roman perception was very similar. Horace, Ovid, and Juvenal praise simple foods such as *puls* (cereal or pease-porridge) and greens and bacon. These foods had a strong moral value because they were associated with gods and with ancestors leading a simple country life. At the same time many Romans and Italians were subject to those Greek chefs from S. Italy and the mainland, to direct Eastern influence from the Eastern empire, and to some Western imports, such as ham from France.

We may then identify a cultural process. An improvement in diet for certain classes at least; excitement over the latest import; criticism. It is important to be alert to this process, and to the part it plays in literature. We should not take the trenchant criticisms in Roman satire to reflect what 'the Romans' thought. It was the very same Romans who were eating in an innovatory way. As social historians we must record both aspects, innovation and reaction.

Roman disgust

I conclude with a final example of ambivalence towards the East, in Juvenal, in his third Satire, clear contrasts are drawn between Roman and Greek/Syrian/Oriental, contrasts marked in part with foods: Umbricius as a child eating Sabine olives *(baca Sabina)* is set against Syrian figs and damson (= Damascus) plums (*pruna et cottona)* which come in with oriental immigrants. In passages of strong invective such as this, on racial or class themes for example, food is a symbol in the argument: foreign food identifies something non-Roman and unacceptable. In other satires where the tone is different, food does not carry this symbolism. So in Satire 11, Juvenal describes an unpretentious meal he will provide from his farm at Tibur, home produce. not mark et goods. For dessert he offers grapes, apples, and Signian and Syrian pears *(Signinum Syriumque pirum:* Signia is in Latium). These are clearly varieties of pear, both grown on Juvenal's farm. (There is plentiful evidence for Syrian pears grown in Italy.) Here we have the *fact* of an Eastern product accepted and grown in Italy, and indeed praised as part of an idealised home-grown diet; and beside that we may consider the various *associations* a Roman may choose to attach to such a product.

The World Health Organisation in its report for 1990 recommends that you follow a Mediterranean (Greek or Roman) and not a Persian diet: you should live on a staple of cereal and not of meat.

John Wilkins eats, and teaches, at the University of Exeter. He doesn't only read texts about food – most of Greek literature (and especially tragedy) is grist to his mill.